

# MONTECITO

MAGAZINE



Santa Rosa Island

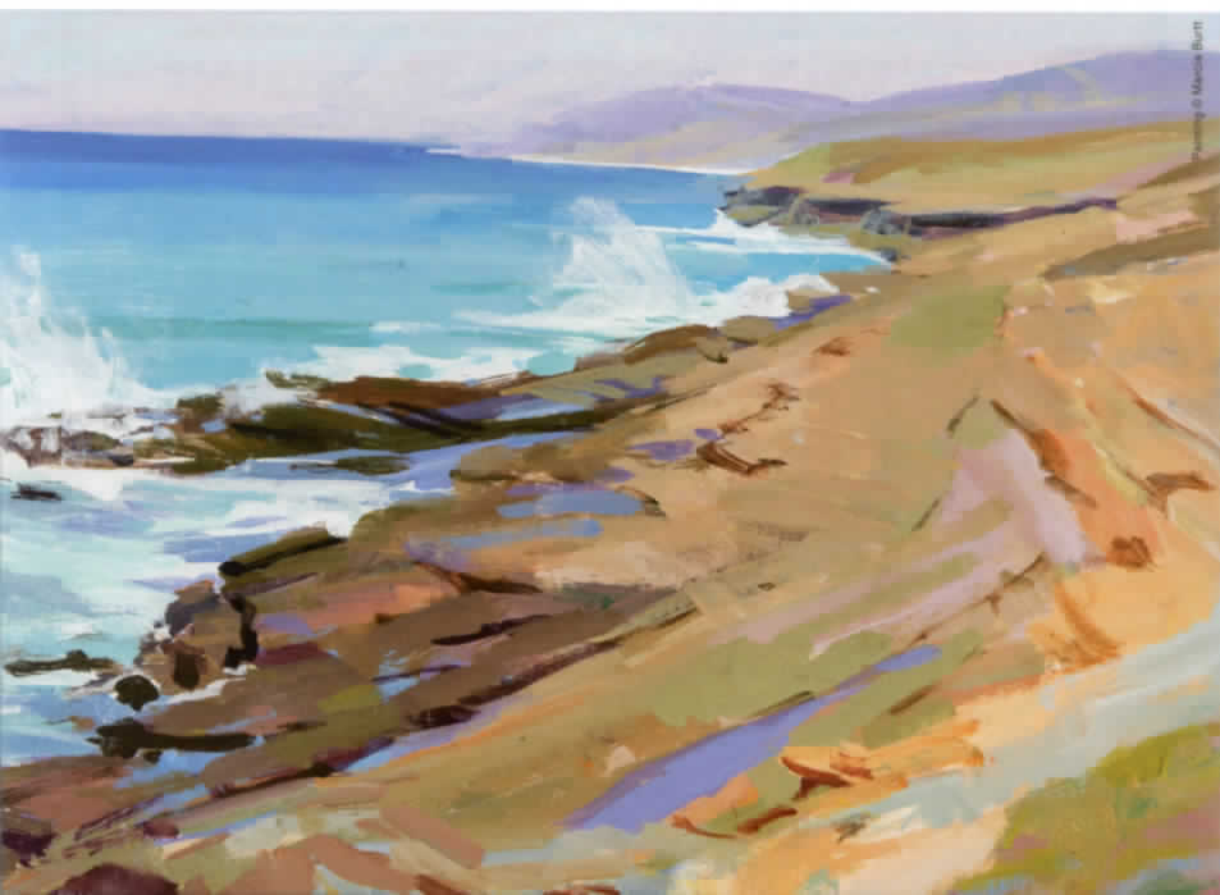
# Treasures in a Time Warp



**M**iles of white-sand beaches with zero crowds. Trails to a rare pine forest, steep sandstone cliffs, majestic mountains and spectacular canyons filled with fascinating remnants of prehistoric times. A bird-watchers' dream-come-true, with dozens of unusual species flitting about a deep blue sky. Thousands of elephant seals, sea lions and other mammals basking in the sun. Where is this magical place?

This veritable Shangri-la may sound like a mythical world invented in a film studio, but it's actually Santa Rosa Island, only 26.5 miles from Santa Barbara County's mainland shores. It's one of five islands that comprise Channel Islands National Park and is the second-largest island in California (15 miles wide and 10 miles long). Although all of the Channel Islands are well worth exploring, Santa Rosa offers a few things you won't find anywhere else in the park, and in some cases, the world.

By Cheryl Crabtree • Art by Marcia Burt, Jeremy Harper, John Iwerks, Thomas Van Stein





The sometimes rough seas in the Santa Barbara Channel limited human access, which enabled numerous species of flora and fauna to evolve and thrive independently in diverse ecosystems. Isolation fostered the development of nearly 150 endemic or unique plants and animals on the islands, and Santa Rosa Island is home to 46 of them. Six plant species are found only on Santa Rosa Island and nowhere else on Earth. These include the Santa Rosa Island subspecies of Torrey pine—one of the rarest pines in the world (the mainland species at Torrey Pines State Reserve is the only other)—and the munchkin dudleya.

Santa Rosa's isolation has continued to this day—which means that while much of Southern California's formerly pristine natural environments have been extensively developed, the island reflects the coastal California landscapes the early explorers encountered several centuries ago. Santa Rosa Island is one of the least visited national parks. Grand Canyon National Park drew nearly 6.4 million visitors last year. In contrast, "Santa Rosa Island welcomed just over 10,000 visitors last year. The mainland visitor center in Ventura Harbor receives an average of 200,000 visitors a year," says Chief of Interpretation and Public Information Officer Yvonne Menard. Yet, because of Santa Rosa's many truly unique treasures, it should be close to the top of anyone's travel bucket list.

Below, top – Northern elephant seal pups resting on an island beach.

Below, bottom – On June 29, 1994, San Diego State University geologist Thomas Rockwell discovered some interesting bones on a Santa Rosa Island sand dune. He and three other scientists began to excavate the site and soon uncovered the remains of the most complete skeleton ever found of a pygmy mammoth, a species that lived on the island nearly 13,000 years ago and found only on the Channel Islands and nowhere else on Earth.

Left, top – These island foxes live exclusively on Santa Rosa and five other Channel Islands. A nonprofit organization, Channel Islands Restoration (cirweb.org) has worked on Santa Rosa Island since 2006 to help protect and conserve the island's rare and endemic animals and plants.

Left, bottom – Poseidon's Fireworks, where ocean meets the bluffs on the southeast side of the island.



PHOTO BY CHUCK GRAMMA

*Beginning the excavation of the World's First Full Pygmy Mammoth Skeleton on Santa Rosa Island Discovered June 29, 1994 by Thomas Rockwell Geologist, S.D.S.U. Excavation dates Aug. 9-1994. Left to Right: Larry Agenbroad-Paleontologist, N.A.U., Thomas Rockwell-Geologist, S.D.S.U., Louise Roth-Zoologist, Duke University, N.C., Don Morris-Archaeologist, C.I.N.P.S.*



Painting © Thomas Van Steen

Local photographer, writer and outdoor enthusiast Chuck Graham has circumnavigated the island by kayak many times and has hiked or run across nearly all its trails. "Santa Rosa is really special," he says. "The amazing views, the beaches that look the same as they did 200 or 300 years ago—we don't have anything else like that over here on the mainland." Chuck says Santa Rosa is unique for many additional reasons. "Santa Rosa is a great island because it has such great natural history. There are the discoveries of prehistoric remains, a pygmy mammoth found by paleontologists in 1994, and just recently, a sea cow, the equivalent of a manatee, that dates back 20 to 25 million years."

Apart from extensive paleontological resources, Santa Rosa Island holds more than 700 archeological sites. Humans have been here for thousands of years—evidenced by radiocarbon dating of one of oldest human remains discovered in North or South America, a more than 13,000-year-old man in Arlington Canyon on the northwest side of the island. The dates coincide with recent scientific findings that migrations happened from Asia and North America southward, via land and sea.

Dr. John Johnson, Curator of Anthropology at the Santa Barbara Natural History Museum, is working on a book about these early findings. "Probably the most important thing about this archeological research is that we have the earliest evidence for people in coastal California at 13,000 years ago at the Arlington Springs site," Johnson states. Johnson explains that "Arlington Springs Man, as he's called, lived during a time when the four northern Channel Islands were all still united together as one mega-island (Santarosae), and the climate was

Below, top – The Vail & Vickers ranch tack room in the barn at the main ranch. Cowboy life on the island revolved around the tack room, bunkhouse and range. Below, bottom – Foreman's house at Bechers Bay, looking toward the southeast and Santa Cruz Island.

Right, top – Nita Vail on horseback at the Santa Rosa Island ranch in 1962, with her mom and dad, Kay and Al Vail. "There was such freedom as a kid to roam and just be wild on the island—no TV or phones, just each other, the land, the pranks, riding horses and a good book of course," she recalls.

Right, bottom – Nita Vail, Gretel Ehrlich, Bill Wallace, Pancho Castillo and other ranch hands round up cattle at Carrington Point, late spring 1998.

Painting © Marcia Burt



Painting © Jeremy Hopper



much cooler than today. The evidence that people had arrived on that island by 13,000 years ago demonstrates that watercraft were in use along the California coast at that early date and lends support for a theory that the earliest people to enter the Western Hemisphere may have migrated along the Pacific coast from Siberia and Alaska using boats."

### Chumash Era

*"We have not lost our connection to our island birthplace...the cord is still tied."*

— Julie Tumamait-Stenslie, Island Chumash descendant  
From National Park Service film, *Treasure in the Sea*

The Chumash, the native inhabitants of Santa Rosa, lived on the island from the time of Arlington Man until the Spanish began to colonize California in the late 1700s and met the natives while exploring the islands. Johnson says that up to 1,200 Chumash lived in seven or eight villages distributed around the island's coast. Unfortunately, European contact brought diseases that decimated the natives and also disrupted their trade-based economy. The last of the Chumash islanders left Santa Rosa Island in 1816–1817. Other humans followed, including Chinese abalone fishermen. According to Michael Redmon, director of research at the Santa Barbara Historical Museum, "The Chinese formed an important part of the Santa Barbara fishing industry from the mid-1860s into the early 20th century. They established a number of camps on the Channel Islands, their catch of fish and abalone exported to the mainland, Hawaii, and even to China."

### Ranching Era

*"We were privileged to know Santa Rosa Island so intimately...we were taught about the responsibility of stewardship and taking care of the land."*

— Nita Vail, Walter L. Vail's great-granddaughter

The Mexican government granted Santa Rosa Island to the Carrillo family in 1844, and ranching operations began soon thereafter. The More family ran a sheep ranch (one of the largest in the state) from 1858 to 1901. In the 1860s and 1870s they built a compound at Bechers Bay that included a ranch house, barn and blacksmith shop. (The park recently restored these buildings—among the oldest in Santa Barbara County—so visitors can learn about the island's ranching history as well as its natural resources.)



From 1901 to 1998, Vail & Vickers operated a beef cattle ranch with as many as 9,000 head of cattle on the island at a time. Channel Islands officially became a national park on March 5, 1980. The National Park Service acquired Santa Rosa Island from Vail & Vickers in December 1986, but ranching operations continued until 1998, when all cattle were removed from the island.

According to Nita Vail, "Santa Rosa Island was purchased by our great-grandfather Walter L. Vail and his close friend J.V. Vickers in 1901, both men originating from ranching operations in Arizona. My father Al Vail took over as the managing partner in the 1960s, a role he held until his passing in 2000." She continues, "My mother and father met at a party in Beverly Hills (imagine Audrey Hepburn meets John Wayne) and I doubt she had any clue where her life was headed when they eloped in 1956. She was a model and a writer and loved a good party. A year later she was living on a beautiful, often windswept island with an infant (me) 30 miles from the mainland and a long way from her friends and social life. We moved to a house they bought in Santa Barbara about a year later but we [Nita and her mother and younger sister] often traveled back and forth by plane or the cattle boat *Vaquero II* (see *Montecito Magazine*, Spring 2018, "The Lindwall Legacy") to be with my dad."

"I loved spending vacations on the island with my cousins and friends and I cried every time we had to leave. We would drive all over the island in a 4WD pickup truck to our favorite places, swimming, fishing, hiking and exploring, dogs, fishing poles

Below, top – The *Vaquero II* at the Bechers Bay pier—the last operating wooden cattle boat on the Pacific Coast. Legendary Santa Barbara boatbuilder Paul "Sugar" Lindwall built it for Vail & Vickers to ferry cattle to local mainland harbors. The *Vaquero II* was in service for 40 years and played an important role in island ranching operations.

Below, bottom – In the 1860s and 1870s the More family ran a sheep ranch and built a compound at Bechers Bay that included a ranch house, barn and blacksmith shop. These buildings are among the oldest structures in Santa Barbara County and remain as reminders of the island's history. On the right are the schoolhouse and horse barn (sometimes called the saddle barn), and the branding shed is on the left.

Painting © Thomas Van Stein



Painting © John Iwerks





and picnics piled high on the mattresses in the back.”

When Nita was 16 she talked her father into letting her work as a cowgirl during the full three-month spring shipping season for her high school senior project, and thereafter rode most fall-inventory gathers with her dad and the cowboys until the cattle operation ceased in 1998. “We rode the full 54,000 acres two times during the month of September to count and doctor cattle. They were long days, often over 20 miles in the saddle, early mornings in the fog, laughing over coffee and graham crackers and peanut butter at the cow camps, and a constant gin rummy game going with my father at night. It was always the highlight of the year for me and a father-daughter relationship I treasured.”

Tim Vail, Nita’s cousin, is also a fourth-generation member of the Vail family that ran the ranching operation on Santa Rosa Island. “I began riding horses earlier than I can remember, and working the ranch was just about all I ever wanted to do,” he recalls. He has many memories of working and playing on the ranch. “The whole season of roundup in late spring and again in early fall was special; gathering cattle, working horses and the camaraderie that came from being with the other hands year-round offshore. One grew to be self-reliant yet very connected on a moment-by-moment basis with the rest of the crew and their families. It is just not like that on the mainland. It always seemed like this is what it must have been like in the world a century or more ago.”

He continues, “An island is a mini-continent. The south side is warm and the beaches are the best on

Below, top – Pete and Karen Healey with their son, Charlie, on the north side of the island. Pete’s uncle, Bill Wallace, was the foreman of the ranch for over 30 years (1968 to 1999), and Pete started going out to visit and help at age 12. Karen’s grandfather began working there in 1914. Her father was born on the island and lived there a good portion of his life. Detailed stories and photos of island life appear in Pete’s book, *The Island: Reminiscences of Twentieth Century Ranching on Santa Rosa Island*, published in 2017. “Being a kid on the Island was better than going to Disneyland,” says Pete.

Below, bottom – The historic main ranch house near Bechers Bay is one of several buildings recently restored by the National Park Service.



COURTESY PETE HEALEY



Painting © John Iwens

the island. We had to gather cattle there first in the year when the grass lost its nutrition as it turned from green to brown. The north side flatlands amount to about 2/3 of the island's area and is cloaked in fog later into the year allowing tremendous feed growth in good years on which to graze the cattle. The west end is as isolated as you can get with nothing but the wide Pacific Ocean between you and Asia. And the ranch headquarters on the eastern shore, just across the pond from Santa Barbara. I say pond, but it was a world away from the mainland.

"As a boy, and like the rest of my family, I never thought I would do anything else but work the island. It was a hell of a place to grow up and not many kids get to grow up like that anymore. We were all made better for the experience of working and playing there. I think the best things I remember about Santa Rosa Island all have to do with the people I was lucky to be with in the Channel Island community. I never forget them."

Other locals who spent a great deal of time on the island include Pete and Karen Healey, whose relatives worked there during the ranching era. Pete's uncle, Bill Wallace, was the foreman of the ranch for over 30 years, and Pete started going out to visit and help at age 12. Karen's grandfather started working there in 1914. Her father was born on the island and lived there a good portion of his life.

"Being a kid on the Island was better than going to Disneyland," says Pete. "There was so much to do. At that time there were elk, deer and wild pigs, hundreds of foxes. We went hunting, fishing, hiking, played on the beach, and if we got lucky, we got to help the cowboys gather cattle." Pete adds, "The Island was unique because it was so pristine, it was also an extremely well-managed cattle ranch. We still go out twice a year to trim the feet on the last two horses from the ranching days. When they die it will be the end of livestock on the Island since 1843."

Looking back on the many years her extended family owned the island, Nita Vail captures the essence of the era. "We were privileged to know Santa Rosa Island so intimately and it influenced many of my family members in their career choices (veterinarian, rancher, immigration attorney and conservationist) and we were taught about the responsibility of stewardship and taking care of the land. It is my hope that the Channel Islands National Park Service under new leadership will truly honor the history of the island—from the mystical Chumash to the pioneering ranchers—and provide the public a wonderful balanced experience." ♦

*For more information on Santa Rosa Island, including transportation via Island Packers and Channel Islands Aviation, visit [nps.gov/chis](http://nps.gov/chis).*



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